

05/14/06 Trego High School Commencement Address

Trego High School Commencement Address

Class of 2006

May 14, 2006

Let me begin by saying congratulations to the 2006 graduating class of Trego High School. Being here this afternoon brings back memories of my own graduation from Plainville High School more years ago than I care to remember. I recall my graduation as a day of mixed emotions. I felt confused. It was an experience filled with both anticipation and sadness - celebrating my graduation, but knowing I would miss my friends and wondering what was ahead of me. The real journey of my life was about to begin. And now too, so will yours.

Before addressing the graduates, let me first visit with some of the others here this afternoon that helped make this day possible. First, let me recognize the moms and dads. If you ask someone who had the most influence on their life, no one ever says their Congressman. I don't mind telling you that I have one of the most fulfilling and important jobs in the world. It requires responsibility, extensive knowledge, being on call 24 hours a day, combining firm leadership with careful negotiations, and keeping one's word. The job I have just described is not that of a Congressman, but that of a father to my wife's and my two teenage daughters. Few things in life are more important than our jobs as moms and dads, and they deserve our thanks. So graduates, please join me in applauding the most important people in your lives-- your parents.

Moms and dads, thank you for all you have done to help these graduates reach this important point in their lives. For you this means turning a page as well. As your son or daughter moves on, you can take great pride in knowing you have helped them take a giant step forward with their lives. But there is also sadness today, sadness in recognizing that your kids are no longer going to be as dependent on you as they once were and in realization how fast they grow up and how little time we have with them. It is a reminder to each of us as parents who become preoccupied with earning a living and our own pursuits that we need to make the most of every day of our lives with our children.

I also want to take a moment to recognize the important role of educators in the lives of students. Many of us have teachers who changed our lives. Educators, who for inadequate pay, educated us not only with facts and figures, but also instilled in us a love for learning and a sense that there is a big world out there beyond the city limits of our home towns. So today I salute the teachers who touched the lives of these graduating seniors. May you find satisfaction in knowing that you have made a tremendous difference in the lives of your students.

And now to the graduates - let me visit with you about your lives and your futures. I have three recommendations:

First, commit yourselves to excellence in whatever you do, big things and little. There is a distinction between excellence and perfection. Things will not always turn out to be perfect. Perfection has to do with the end product, but excellence has to do with the process. It is making the most of your God-given abilities. A little thing is a little thing, but doing the little things well is a big thing.

Second, commit yourselves to character. Character has to do with the principles you live your life by. Honesty, courage to always do what is right no matter the consequences, personal responsibility--that is the kind of character we need in each of you and in each citizen of our nation.

You will be faced with choices in your life, many of them difficult choices, which will test you and test your character. The choice that is the most profitable, the one that brings fame or power, isn't necessarily the best one. Do not allow yourself to lose sight of what is truly important because things like social status and material goods can fade with time. Integrity is the only lasting currency in our relationships with others. Integrity matters.

We face new and greater challenges in today's world. Our country's problems are evident and growing each day. Unfortunately, they are not just overseas. For too long, right and wrong have been growing more relative and open to interpretation. What we are exposed to and what is allowed by society in today's world has changed since I sat in your chair. And it will no doubt change even more so during your lifetime.

Alexis De Tocqueville, the French writer who studied our country in the early 1800s, observed that, "Not until I went into the churches of America and heard her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, she will cease to be great."

So remember - it is up to each of us as citizens to renew our commitment to character. No less than the survival of our country and our way of life depends on it.

My third suggestion is to commit yourselves to service to others. I am convinced that success is not measured by what you get out of life, but by what you give back.

I can tell you from my own experience that satisfaction does not derive from economic well being, status on the social ladder or power in our nation's capital. For a long time, I had a goal for my life - to become a Member of Congress. Nine years ago, with the help of many people, I reached that goal. But like so many goals we set for ourselves, when they are material or related to status, even when they are accomplished, we are left feeling empty and unsatisfied. After the election and the excitement of being in Washington, D.C. had worn off, I recognized that without the right attitude this

was going to be just another job. I needed to remind myself that I had a wonderful opportunity to be of service to others - that I was not elected to office to satisfy my own ego, but rather to the best of my ability, live a life in service to others.

We are often told that our country is in need of great leaders. I believe that what we really need is great servants. People who serve others, not themselves. We need people like your parents and your teachers who put doing for you above doing for themselves. While I believe in the opportunities for service in elective office, I would not suggest that running for office is the only way or even the best way to serve your community. To the contrary, I believe that individuals who volunteer their time in churches, neighborhoods and communities will have the greatest effect on other people's lives and in the process add meaning to our own lives. The effect of this person-to-person involvement can be far greater than any government program or the results of any election.

Finally, you each should know that your educational accomplishment is outstanding. Now that your final exams are competed and your diploma is in hand, it's easy to enjoy the present and not think about your future education. But as each of you walks away from Trego High School today, whether to the military or college or a job, don't let your education stop.

Aristotle was once asked how much educated men were superior to the uneducated. He replied, "As much as the living are to the dead." To be successful in the future, you must above all be willing to learn. Do not be a dead and uneducated person, but rather yearn for knowledge and experience. I encourage you all - graduates, families, and friends - to never lose your desire to learn.

The world is a large and wonderful place and it is your time to step into it. I ask that you now take your diploma into the world, commit to a life of excellence, character and service, and you will achieve all the success that you deserve. Congratulations and God bless.